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Stealing: It's more than just stuff

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It is so important to know the people and the situation of the people that heard these words for the first time. If you've read the story, then you know that these weren't words shouted over Moses' shoulder as they ran from Egypt. A chunk of time had passed. This was a people who had spent some time away from their captivity in Egypt. They were already a more or less established refugee community. They watched their friends starve, die, and leave the movement. Life on the road was really difficult for them and by this point they had, not a few times, longed for their homes in Egypt. In slavery. "How much better did we have it in Egypt?" they say.

Almost seems mind-bending to think about, right? To want to go back to slavery. But think about it from their perspective: Their people spent close to 400 years there. That is longer than America has been a country. They had rhythm. They had predictability. They had a place to stop. It isn't unlike the pressures people who have been incarcerated for a long-time report after being released without supports—the devil you know is better than the devil you don't. These are the people Moses is sharing these words of life with. A people that needs to be convinced that freedom is the lesser evil to slavery.

Ok, what about us?

When Jesus comes on the scene in the Gospels, he declares in Luke 4 verses 16-21: *"He came to Nazareth where he had been raised. As he always did on the Sabbath, he went to the meeting place. When he stood up to read, he was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Unrolling the scroll, he found the place where it was written, God's Spirit is on me; he's chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor, sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, To set the burdened and battered free, to announce, 'This is God's time to shine!'" He rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the assistant, and sat down. Every eye in the place was on him, intent. Then he started in, "You've just heard Scripture make history. It came true just now in this place."*

Did you hear it? "I have come to set the burdened and the battered free"? Jesus' scholars have understood Jesus to be a new kind of Moses effecting a new kind of Exodus—for us. An exodus that includes freeing people like the Israelites in Egypt, but also everyone from systems and forces that keep us stuck in captivity.

Today, I want to name those modern forms of captivity that all of us fall into sometimes—and what is being stolen from us in the process. Finally, we'll talk about the key to the proverbial door of that captivity.

What's being stolen? Well, maybe the better question is "what do we have to be stolen?" Jesus gives us a clue in Matthew 22 as He is sharing about what it looks like to live in the kingdom of Heaven, or as free-people. He says this, Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." Here he is just echoing what Moses said to Israel generations and generations earlier in Deuteronomy 6.

Heart. Soul. Mind. Those are the things that we have that get stolen most often. The things that when stolen put us right back into the kind of captivity Jesus came to free us from. So, what does that look like? Let's talk about our heart.

Heart. In the Greek, the word for heart is *Kardia* and it has a connotation of passion, driving impulse, or your dynamism. How's your heart these days? How dynamic do you feel when you leave the house every day for work or school?

Maybe you feel like this: Chris Smalls, when he started his entry level job at an Amazon fulfillment center in New Jersey, felt dynamic. He was excited to land a job that he was told offered all the benefits he needed and all of the upward mobility he could handle—as long as he worked hard. As long as he was dynamic. As long as he had heart and passion for the job.

So, that is what he did. He showed up. Worked hard. He would walk upwards of 16 miles a day. For 10 to 12 hours a day. Picking more than 400 items an hour to be shipped to your doorstep. The way it works in the warehouse is that for an entire day, you wear a device that tracks your movement, and you are followed by machines that tell you what to

do and when to do it up to 400 times an hour. Super relaxing, right? Wrong. According to Chris, the feeling was like he was being chased for 12 hours a day.

Not to be deterred, he worked harder, and even got promoted. The trouble was that the position he got promoted to give him more work. To him, it was like they had extracted everything he had, and now they were going for what was left. So, that's when he tried for a new job at Amazon. He applied 46 times, got interviewed twice, and didn't get promoted. Predictably, he hit a wall. He could go no further. He burned out. His heart was stolen from him.

Nearly 3 out of 5 workers today report being burned out at work. So, at some level they feel exhausted emotionally and physically, they feel detached from the people they serve and the people they serve with, and they feel ineffective, like they aren't even making a difference. They feel like Chris Smalls at Amazon.

How many of you feel that way? Like your heart is being stolen by your job or career? It's not surprising. From the time we are kids, we are told that our jobs are our path to becoming our best-selves, to really finding out who we are, to really being in-sync with our hearts. Unfortunately, though, that is a promise our careers can't make because they are not the ones that gave us our heart in the first place—God did. The first thing that gets stolen is our heart.

Let's talk about our mind. Our mind refers to that logic driven, argument-making, idea-generating part of our total self. It is our ability to focus, pay attention, and be mindful. Unsurprisingly, it is another place our culture is robbing us blind. Anna Lembke is a researcher at Stanford and studies various types of addiction. On a recent episode of the Hidden Brain podcast, she talked about the way that our society is designed, engineered, to hack the part of our brains involved in addiction.

It's like this; Much of our behavior is driven by a dopamine response loop. Dopamine is the reward chemical in our brain. Now, it is important to know that our brains love equilibrium. That is, to stay level, so it is important to think of your brain and

that dopamine system as a kind of scale that wants to be balanced. So, when you do something pleasurable, the dopamine side gets pushed down, Yay! Well, in order to get back to even, your brain then sends little chemical gremlins to push down on the other side of the scale, triggering a downer effect, so that you know you'll need to do something to get that dopamine hit again.

Very useful if you're a hunter-gatherer that needs to be motivated to find food to live. Well, technology companies and social media companies have designed our phones and apps to hack that process. So, you sign up for a social media app. Then it connects you. You post a picture of your cat. Then, "bing!" you get a notification, grandma patty loves it! Dopamine. So, you do it again. Bing! Then again, and again, and again.

Oddly, though, with each big, it doesn't do as much. That is because your brain is trying to balance itself out and sending more and more downer gremlins to the scale. That creates those withdrawal feelings where your brain is saying enough! The developers behind the phone and the app know that, so they leave you hanging for a bit so you can level out. Then, Bing! And we're off to the races to complete the loop again. While all of this is happening, your mind, your psyche, is being dragged into captivity to that loop.

Here are the stats:

- Around 8% of the global population is addicted to the internet.
- 85% of American adults can't spend a day without going online.
- Smartphone use is involved in 26% of car accidents in America.
- 12% of teen boys have a video gaming addiction.
- 50% of teenagers consider themselves addicted to their smartphones.
- The average person checks their phone 96 times a day.
- Teens spend over seven hours a day in front of a screen.

Friends, the mind that God has given you is being stolen from you and it isn't hyperbole to say that we are in captivity to our devices.

Let's talk about our soul. What is our soul? The Greek word here is psyche and it refers to the eternal, always-you. It is your identity. And, today, there are an awful lot of people having an identity to crises. Including me.

I'll just say it, middle age is hard. I'm 38 now and all of the questions about who I am and who I'm becoming are now at the point where they can't be ignored anymore. They need an answer. So, over the last year and a half or so, I've helped my family bury the last of my grandparent's generation. I've also performed weddings for cousins, and I'm going to perform weddings for my two younger brothers and their fiancés this year.

Needless to say, there has been a lot of reflection around my identity: My family tree, my hometown, where I come from, and the very meaning of what it means to be a Kramme. In each of those family gatherings and in the ones to come, I'll be narrating the experience for my kids, deciding how to tell the story for them and for me, grafting them into something bigger. In order to do that well, I need to have a sense of identity. We live in a strange point in history where that work is compromised.

Theologian and philosopher Charles Taylor in his book, *The Secular Age*, describes what we're experiencing as the Nova Effect. It's like this: not more than 50 years ago, we stayed far more connected to our families of origin, to our communities of origin, and to just a handful of patterns for being humans. So, in terms of our identity, our soul, it was like shopping for toothpaste at Aldi.

Not anymore. We're shopping on Amazon and there are 1,000 kinds of toothpaste and for as much freedom of choice as it provides, it has blown up our ability to construct a coherent identity. The result is that we feel disconnected from anything bigger. We feel lost sometimes when by all accounts we should feel secure. Our midlife crises are even more midlife crisis-y because we've spent so much time exploring everything we could be, that we've let go of many of the things that have helped us structure our identity for most of human history. Our souls feel lost, stuck. It's like a captivity.

When we read about the way that the Israelites longed for their homes in Egypt, it seems almost incomprehensible, but then here we are. Living in a world that routinely locks up our heart, soul, and mind in ways that while different are equally as binding.

Friends, Burnout is a spiritual problem. Tech addiction is a spiritual problem. Identity crises are a spiritual problem. And they are all a kind of Egypt that we, like the Israelites so many years ago, long for—even strive for.

So, what's the key to getting free and staying that way? Well, I think it can be found in the internal coherence of the Ten Commandments themselves. Way back in June, we learned that the first commandment was "you shall have no other God's before me." It is a commandment that Jesus translates simply into, "Love God."

What does it mean to love God? Jesus shows us the way again, by giving back to God what God has first given us: Our Heart, our soul, and our Mind—you can add strength, too. In other words, by giving our whole selves to God first. I think that so often in our faith these little Egypt's get the best of us while God gets the rest of us. The remainder. Friends, again, if you look at the Ten Commandments, the very next, the second commandment warns us against making idols; almost as-if to say, that at the moment we forget the first commandment, love God first, that we are prone to fall into captivity to the second. That is, we'll worship our careers, our comfort, and our freedom more than the God that made us, loves us, and frees us.

Tangibly, practically, the way to practice this is straightforward. We do it every week—worship. Worship is all about loving God first. That's why we insist on you make it a regular part of your discipleship. But thanks be to God, that we don't only worship when we're here. We can choose to give back to God what God has given us in all times and in all places—including work, our technology, and our identity.

So, as you go today, may you do that. May you stay a free people by keeping God first, by giving God the best of your heart, soul, and mind. The rest will follow.